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THE ÆSTHETIC VALUE OF POETRY.

SHAKESPEARE and Milton were not writers of text-books. Nevertheless the plays of the one and the poems of the other find places on the list of classics prescribed for college entrance. Neither does the modern poet set his pen to paper to produce a text. He has in mind the embodying of a sentiment, emotion, feeling—call it what you will—an interpretation of life as he knows it, and feels it, and loves it. He aims at an æsthetic and emotional result, seldom at a purely intellectual one; but the school seizes upon this æsthetic and emotional product and uses it for intellectual purposes—for drill in grammar, for illustrations of rhetoric, for the furnishing forth of empty minds with gilded ideas not their own. To show to what extent such mental gymnastics violate all the fundamental principles of æsthetic production is the province of this paper. In the first part I shall ask psychology to tell how, in accordance with the modern psycho-physical theories, the æsthetic value of poetry arises; for it is the business of psychology to point out the fundamental laws of mental life under which the poet labors, though he may not himself be aware of them. In the second part the answer of psychology is applied to present practice in the schoolroom.

I. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE ÆSTHETIC VALUE OF POETRY.

It is perhaps best in the beginning to limit somewhat the use of the term “æsthetic pleasure” to that kind which by common consent is called highest. Poetry may give a pleasure which is merely intellectual. Its effects may vary from the agreeable to the æsthetically pleasing. I understand that the one condition necessary to the highest æsthetic attitude is isolation, the separation of the object from the world, and the establishing of a relation between itself and the observer such that consciousness for the time contains no other elements. The establishing of this relation is in effect an extension of the personality so that it includes the æsthetic object, and the definite and exclusive direction of the attention to that object. We may direct our attention as definitely to an unæsthetic object and establish

an exclusive consciousness in regard thereto, but we fail to make it a part of the personality, and it thus lacks æsthetic value.

In order to produce this condition of isolation, it is agreed among philosophers that the object must possess a recognized unity. The feeling of dissatisfaction which is caused by the fragmentary and incomplete renders the æsthetic attitude impossible. The purpose of this part, therefore, is to determine what elements of poetry contribute most to the condition of isolation, with its accompanying transfusion of the personality, and to the recognition of unity.

A general answer is given to this by saying that, in order to be æsthetic, poetry must produce effects which are in accordance with our fundamental physical and mental constitution. Both the physical and the mental sides of our being are composed of two classes of elements: first, those which are derived from the process of evolution, that is, general or racial elements; and, second, those which are individual and personal. The answer, then, may be stated negatively—that no poem can arouse and maintain the æsthetic attitude in a given individual if it causes effects not in harmony with the general and special conditions of his physical and mental constitution. A more specific consideration of how these results are obtained will show that poetry appeals to the human mind by formal means—the sensuous impressions of ear, and eye; and by ideational means—its content. I shall, therefore, discuss verse effects with reference to form and content, and the relation existing between them.

Verse effect is but little concerned with vision. Lines and stanzas may be recognized by the eye and their unity more readily comprehended, but in order to affect æsthetic attitude that unity must already exist in an auditory way. Sight, when concerned with words, conveys a sensation which is readily and regularly transferred to auditory centers, and they in turn are very closely and intimately associated with motor centers. Even when read silently, poetry makes its appeal in an auditory way, and any discussion of the formal elements of it will be for the most part concerned with sound effects.

Sound may be considered in regard to four things: first, the time duration from which rhythm arises; second, the intensity of vibration or loudness; third, the quality of the tone or tone-color; and, fourth, the rapidity of vibration or pitch. Each of these is used separately,

or in combination. It will be necessary to consider each separately, remembering, however, that the effects of one may be increased, modified, or nullified by those of another.

Wundt has said that rhythm is a progressive emotion in which there is an alternation of expectation and satisfaction. On the other hand, many experimenters have shown, it seems to me conclusively, that rhythm has a distinctly motor basis. I should say, therefore, that rhythm in poetry is an element of æsthetic result, because it produces effects which are physical, and which are the common and fundamental ones of our physical being. The alternation of rhythm is consistent with and in harmony with our fundamental physical condition of contraction and relaxation. In addition to the mere muscular contraction and expansion which correspond directly with foot rhythm, the physical organism seems to have, or rather I may say has been shown to have, a rhythm of rhythms—an ebb and flow of energy which rises and falls, coming to a point of discharge. This corresponds directly to line rhythm in poetry. The physical limitation of this ebb and flow, with its completion or “finality,” as Stetson calls it, limits the line length. Just as we find it difficult, unpleasant, or impossible to carry the number of syllables in a foot beyond a certain limit, so do we find difficulty in maintaining a line rhythm if the number of feet passes beyond the limit prescribed by the physical conditions of our organism. In a similar way, stanza rhythm should correspond to a larger rhythmic unit of action, and should have a similar feeling of finality at its close. That this is so will appear more readily after a discussion of the establishing of rhythm.

Experimenters have shown that in beginning a rhythmic series the muscular co-ordination is not immediately established, but that it soon becomes so, and then flows on automatically. The signature of music shows at once the established rhythm, but in other rhythmic series which are unmarked the observer has no such previous intimation, and it takes him some time to get the swing of the movement. In poetry the syllables of the first foot may be such as to render possible but one rhythmic scheme, and when this is repeated in the second foot the reader has established a muscular reaction corresponding to the stimulation interval. If the poet begins with syllables which permit of two rhythmic schemes, one of which is not carried

through the line, the reader may by chance choose this one. The rhythmic action thus established is not reinforced by the accent of the second foot, conflict and confusion result, and rhythmic effect is lost. When once the automatic rhythmic action is established, it will be carried on with all words of the poem with which that particular form is possible, and the possibilities of other forms will be wholly unnoticed. In a similar way, the line form, when once established, is repeated automatically. The major accent, the ebb and flow, and the peculiarities of time and rhythm are all repeated without attracting attention or arousing any feeling of effort.

We may now return to a consideration of stanza rhythm and feel sure that there is a similar establishing of the stanza form, a similar automatic repetition of the component elements, in this case of foot and line rhythms, and a similar ebb and flow coming to a discharge and feeling of finality. This progression to a finality, and the appreciation that the finality has been reached—that is, the recognition of the ebb and flow—the contraction and expansion in their beginning and completion, is in effect a recognition of unity, and it is this recognition of unity which is necessary to the establishing of the æsthetic attitude. I may say, then, that rhythm contributes to æsthetic attitude because it establishes motor activities which bring about a feeling of unity.

The second variation in sound comes from the amplitude of the vibrations giving intensity or loudness. Intensity, considered as form and not in its relation to content, has little effect upon the beauty. It plays some part in rhythm, as it is one of the elements by which the accent is marked. Likewise the completion of verse unity is marked by a decrease in intensity. This is probably the result of physiological conditions, and unless the intensity is brought into prominence because of a failure to conform to what may be called its natural condition, it remains a passive factor in the establishing of unity. That is, the unity is established by the motor activities, with the intensity of sound serving only as the material of expression of this discharge or finality; and the use of an intensity not suited to this destroys the resulting feeling of completion and unity, and thus hinders in the establishing of the æsthetic attitude.

In the third place, sound may be considered with reference to its

tone-color or timbre. By its generic tone-color or quality do we distinguish the sounds of the human voice from all other sounds, even though they may have the same duration, intensity, and pitch. This generic tone-color contributes much to the æsthetic value of poetry, because it arouses motor activities which are customary and habitual. The appeal of generic speech-tone differs from that of rhythm in that it has to do with physiological conditions which are racial rather than general. To be sure, that which is human applies to all tongues, but the greater part of the effect comes from the fact that the sounds are those of our own language, and that the connection between sound and motor centers has been long well established. This connection between auditory and motor centers is a fundamental condition of our nature and the use of words or sounds which through unfamiliarity fail to make the connection readily and easily detracts from the feeling of completeness, and therefore hinders the recognition of unity. A phonograph may reproduce a poem, giving the intensity, pitch, and duration of the human voice, but the lack of human tone-color renders æsthetic effect impossible.

The selection of words having a pleasing tone-color in themselves has much to do with attaining to æsthetic effect, but much more is accomplished by various combinations of tone-colors. The first of these is rhyme. Rhyme is primarily a resemblance of tone-color, or rather it is the recurrence of the same tone-color. Stetson has shown that in order to be effective the intensity and pitch of the rhyming words must be nearly the same. He has also shown that the presence of rhyme is not necessary to the recognition of the verse unity, but that, when present, the verse pause may be considerably shortened; and concludes that the function of rhyme is to serve as a cue or suggestion to the mind that the verse unity is complete. I am inclined to believe that rhyme may be included in the automatic physical action of verse repetition, and that the shock which comes from not finding a rhyme, when expected, arises from the necessity of an unexpected physical readjustment. When once the rhyme scheme is mastered, the physical reactions of rhythm move along smoothly and include the expected rhymes; but if the rhyme fails to appear, either because of omission, or because the poet has made the rhyme a visual one depending on spelling rather than on sound, the resulting physical

readjustment is felt as a shock. It attracts attention to itself, interferes with the finality discharge, and so detracts from both unity and isolation.

A second variation of tone-color includes those recurrences of vowel and consonant sounds to which the term "assonance" has been applied. Assonance may be initial or internal. When initial it is called alliteration. This repetition of the same tone-color on accented syllables aids rhythm. Its further pleasing effect results from the fact that, if not too long continued, pleasure arises from alternation of nerve stimulation and periods of cessation. To some extent the pleasure of rhyme undoubtedly arises from this source. When assonance is internal, it concerns itself with the distribution of liquids and other consonant or vowel sounds. Phonetic syzygy or the use of cognates can be included here also.

Though much depends upon the simple tone-color of the words selected, yet it seems that pleasurable effects depend more upon an arrangement which provides for an alternation of closed and open sounds so placed that in speaking them all suggestion of strain or tension is avoided, and the organs easily and naturally pass from one position to the next.

The fourth variation of sound is pitch. Technically considered, melody is a succession of tones of different pitch. Commonly we include much more than this. Melody, in this general sense, is concerned "with the selection of words and their arrangement so as to provide a pleasing succession of speech sounds which shall interweave themselves, with the rhythmical and logical accents, into a harmonious speech tune." This is in reality a combination of many elements, part of which have been already explained. Considering only the pitch relations of melody, it seems that speech tunes have been determined by the content. A single word as "O" may be made by a change of pitch to represent many different things. Our racial experiences have determined certain combinations of tones into speech tunes with definite meanings, and if the poem is read in accordance with these established relations the auditory sensations arouse physical reactions which are customary and habitual, and therefore pleasant.

The relation of the elements of form to each other may be stated

generally by saying that rhythm is the primary and dominant factor. It arouses more definitely a fundamental activity of the physical being than do the others, and so compels the others to yield to it. Rhyme, alliteration, vowel assonance, consonant distribution, phonetic syzygy, and melody itself must needs conform to the rhythm, and if they fail to do so, the lack of harmonious adjustment causes a shock and interferes with the æsthetic result.

Coming now to the discussion of the effect of content upon beauty, in verse, we find that it has been contended that the form alone is sufficient. It must be admitted that rhythmical productions have a pleasing effect. When devoid of all sense, however, a poem cannot produce a feeling which rises above the agreeable, or, if we deem the feeling worthy of the term "æsthetic," it is still separate and distinct, and different from that aroused by a poem with content. It may present all of the elements necessary for the extension of our physical personality, but it lacks the possibility of providing for the extension of our emotional self—a part of our being which is no less important.

We may demand of this content that it fulfil the same requirements made in regard to form. Isolation and unity are necessary. In order to attain to these, it must present itself in accordance with general human experience, and it must conform to the experience of the individual. The appreciation of a poem to the extent of æsthetic pleasure is wholly dependent on the possession of a proper associative background. This is entirely separate and distinct from the ability of the poem to arouse definite associations. Santayana has well said that a poet must have experienced life before he can portray it, and it may be said with greater emphasis that the reader must have experienced life before he can appreciate the life portrayed. The poet's task is not to portray nature, but *his* ideal of nature. Reading the poem I find *my* ideal. What this ideal is will depend upon my experiences, associations, reflections, moods, and habits of thought. It may not be the ideal you get from the same poem, nor yet the one the poet attempted to set forth. That poem which corresponds most closely to both the general and the individual experiences of men will be read with appreciation by the greatest numbers, and, if it is really worth while, will last long. This suggests another necessity—that

the ideal set forth shall be in accordance with our ethical and moral beliefs. If it is not, it invites argument and falls at once from the æsthetic field.

In order to establish and maintain an æsthetic attitude, a poem on its content side must set forth an ideal of real moral or ethical worth, so presented that it shall seem to be in harmony with both our racial and individual spiritual condition.

It now remains for us to consider the relation of content to form. It has been demonstrated that mental activity affects the physical activities. It therefore seems probable that certain definite emotions are coincident with certain rhythmical physical actions. Just what these are I cannot say, but it may generally be stated that those emotional attitudes which we call deeper or more weighty are accompanied by the slower rhythmical movements. We may say, then, that æsthetic effect is dependent upon the existence of a harmonious relationship between the formal elements themselves, and especially between the content and the form, and that this may be brought about by using together elements of form and elements of content which create the same physical reactions. That is, if we choose to produce a certain emotional effect, we must use a rhythm scheme which will set up the motor cycle which naturally accompanies that emotion.

Rhyme, as has been said, serves as a cue to finality. The use of a double, or feminine, rhyme seems at once to detract from the dignity of the poem, probably because it gives a more rapid movement, though this has not been demonstrated. Certain it is that three- and four-syllabled rhymes have been used with humorous effect for generations.

The emotional effect desired will determine also the kind of feet to be selected. Even with feet of apparently the same length we do not get the same physical reactions. The unaccented syllables of the iamb and trochee come at such points in the relaxation and contraction period that the effects are quite different. Similar differences exist between the dactyl and the anapest, and account for the varying uses which may be made of them.

In a similar way, we find short lines unsuited to solemn or weighty subjects. The stanza likewise has its greatest effect if its length

coincide with an organic division of the emotion portrayed. It is well to distinguish sharply between that which is organic and that which is merely conventional or formal. This distinction can be well illustrated by the sonnet. Here we have a single wave of emotion rising to its culmination, and then, with a transition, subsiding. This is its organic condition, and because it is so constituted it fits into the special sonnet form. The emotion rises through the octave and subsides through the sestet. If it does not conform organically to these conditions, it will not be a beautiful sonnet, and in fact has no excuse for being a sonnet at all. It might just as well, and probably better, be expressed in three or four stanzas of four verses each. In like manner, the Shakespearean sonnet is organically in harmony with the form in which it is presented. The form and the rhyme scheme give a series of unities which combine readily and without effort into larger unities—the line unities, the two quartets, the octave, and the sestet, all giving a complete unity to an emotion which otherwise would be fragmentary and incomplete. But, at the same time, all of these physical or formal unities in no way interfere with the logical and emotional unities accompanying them.

II. THE PRESENT SCHOOLROOM PRACTICE.

If the foregoing is even approximately true, what can be said of the modern school methods of teaching poetry—the minute and long-drawn-out pursuit of word derivations, the dry and prosy analysis, the deadening grammar review, the unending explanations of meanings which were clearer before than after, the worse than useless paraphrasing? Who can defend the use of an æsthetic product for such intellectual purposes when better material can be found elsewhere? The very soul and spirit of the poem depend upon its unities and their combination into one greater unity of emotional expression. We can no more keep this when we pick the poem to pieces bit by bit than we can preserve life itself separate from the form in which it is embodied. The carrion crows may muster a thousand strong, attract attention by their cawing, wax fat in the process of tearing flesh from bones; but what they rend has lost its life. We must distinguish between the intellectual and the emotional result of a poem. A blind man may study about light, but he can never actually

know light until he has experienced it. So we may study about a poem and not know it. We may even diagram its sentences and define the words in it without getting the reality of the poem. All artists work with the concrete, hoping through the use of material to express an ideal; and the poet is no exception. It is this ideal conception, this real content, which, if it stands out in isolation as a complete unity, establishing itself for the time being as an extension, or better still as the embodiment, of our real spiritual self, contributes most to the æsthetic result of a poem, and should be the object of our instruction.

Above all, can we not see the folly of paraphrasing? Do we not recognize the form of a poem as inseparable from its reality. Do we hope to drill the young pupil in expression of ideas by asking him to set forth ideas not his own and prescribe for him language which at best is only second class; for the poet has chosen that which is most desirable, and this the pupil may not use under penalty of lacking originality?

And, again, are we justified in teaching children so to read poetry that all the rhyme and rhythm is carefully suppressed? Are we not emphasizing the intellectual at the expense of the spiritual and in defiance of the physical laws of life? Is it not preferable to go even to the extreme of sing-song, rather than to suppress so completely the sense of time and rhythm? Are not children who have neither music nor dancing lessons provided at home liable thus to miss a training which is in accordance with the fundamental laws of physical and mental activity, and may not such a lack bring a deadening of emotional susceptibility in no wise compensated for by any intellectual good which may be attained?

Without discussing the desirability of the intellectual exercises in connection with either prose or poetry, is it not safe to say that prose furnishes at least equal opportunities for their exercise and loses less in the process than does poetry? May we not consider poetry as a work of art whose beauties can be learned by intellectual analysis no more than one can appreciate the beauty of a piece of sculpture by making a chemical analysis of the marble of which it is composed?

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